

WHAT DETERMINE THE NATURE OF ACTIVITIES PROVIDED FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN ART MUSEUMS?*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the findings of an empirical study to explore curators' motivations for older people's art activities. The aim was to seek out the factors that the nature of activities provided for older people in art museums. The survey process included qualitative methodological approaches and twenty one curators took part in the survey. The results were analyzed in relation to the research aims following thematic approaches which suggest that social interaction is the most significant factor in curators' motivations in designing art activities. The findings summarise the results and discuss implications and the research concludes by offering implications for practice.

KEYWORDS: Art Museum Education, Older People, Art Activities & Curators' Motivations

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the ageing population, social care in later life is becoming a social issue with numerous studies exploring the importance of social care policy. Biggs (2001:312) argues, "Aging is, then, split into positive and negative attributes that are separated either between population groups, or as in the present case, different levels of rhetoric". Wearing (1995:265) emphasises the psychological value of interaction for quality of their life as they age, warning against "underutilization of mental, emotional and social potential as well as the physical". This means that older people may have fewer expectations to adjust their life. Nevertheless, demand increases with age and therefore governments require effective policy to serve the public. Maslow (1968) identifies human needs and divides into five categories. Belongingness is ranked third on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and is regarded as a basic human need. Vanderhorst and McLaren (2005:517) support this view, suggesting that "enhancing social support" and "sense of belonging to community" may help older adults' mental health. Therefore, social engagement is a big issue regarding the quality of older people's lives. The Audit Commission (2004:29) proposes a policy map to promote older people's well-being and states that national policy requires "stronger national co-ordination and leadership". Therefore, government and local authorities should consider strong partnerships with stakeholders.

A number of studies emphasise on social impacts of art activities for older people. They indicate that older people are required to engage with arts as art offers the prospect of a mental walk. Enjoying creative activities through artworks promotes subjective well-being in the older person (Wikstrom et al. 1994 cited in Wikstrom 2000:32). Moreover, Boshier and Riddell (1978:165) demonstrate that education benefits older people as participants are: "motivated by Cognitive Interest and Social Contact, [which is] related to life satisfaction" and

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“adjustment to later life”. Peterson and Ogrun note, “older learners [have] less pressure, slower pace, more socialization, and more student direction” (Peterson & Ogrun 1982 cited in Durr & Leptak 1992:150). Therefore, this study explored the development of social engagement through lifelong learning. In particular, this study can deal with emotional issues through lifelong learning in art museums to improve the quality of older people’s lives.

Museums were known as educational institutions open to the public which extend informal learning opportunities so people can teach themselves (Hooper-Greenhill 1991:9). Illeris state, museums are required to “provide more than displays on interesting themes” and connect to “the life experiences of different groups of audiences” (Illeris 2006:17). He recognises museums as ‘centres of learning’ and emphasises the importance of promoting learning to actual and potential visitors. In particular, art activities can promote subjective well-being in older persons and art therefore may enhance social interaction for older people through conversation. Wikstrom (2000:31) explained, art as one of “the most powerful instruments for producing experiences” and highlighted that “art can be looked upon as of the highest value to human attachment beings” (Wikstrom 2000:31). Therefore, art museum educators need to consider the personal achievements of older people who are involved in educational provision.

There is some confusion about how to provide the nature of activities for older people in art museums with several considerations raised. As noted above, “enjoying creative activities through artworks promotes subjective well-being in the older person” (Wikstrom et al. 1994 cited in Wikstrom 2000:32) and Maslow (1968) stresses basic needs and he highlights belongingness among people, which can alleviate social isolation. Therefore, this research will focus on curators’ understanding of the needs of older people as interpreted through activities. This can lead to social benefits through older people’s art activities.

One of the major focuses of this study is to what extent curators understand the needs of older people as interpreted through activities. Wikstrom (2000:34) observed that older people tend to have stimulating dialogues when they engage with visual art programmes through conversation relating to artworks. Another focus of this study is how policy or funding structures might facilitate new approaches to working with older people. The Department for Work and Pensions (2005:71) believes that “local authorities should lead partnership in planning for ageing communities”. Through collaboration in policy and funding, local authorities and health trusts may enhance older people activities in art galleries. Therefore, this study will explore the effectiveness of collaboration and partnership for older people’s quality of life.

Overall, this study tackles the aims of the research questions, such as identifying the factors determining the nature of activities provided for older persons in art museums. To achieve this, this study was divided into objectives as follows: 1) What motivates galleries to work with older people? 2) What practice has developed and why? 3) What do curators feel older people need from such activities? Thus, this study will be looking for effective ways to help the quality of older people’s lives. To explore curators’ opinions, a total of 21 curators participated in the survey, which intended to collect qualitative data using open-ended questionnaires. From the survey, the empirical evidence was compared with existing theories and research and analysed through thematic analysis. This should add to existing knowledge around museum evaluations in several ways and encourage the use of practical frameworks to benefit both art museums and older people. Subsequently, this study could contribute to knowledge around funding, stakeholder partnerships and the relationship between older people and government policy.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative methodology. This method was conducted using open-ended questionnaires for curators since the interview questionnaire can give insight into experts' voices and perspectives on experience. According to Geer (1991), the seven reasons for using openended questions are to: Build rapport and encourage participants; get factual information; expand a list; explain a prior answer; establish knowledge; clarify terminology; and explore new topics. Therefore, this study was willing to receive not only curators' real-life experience of working but also their valuable perspective.

As for the selection of Participants, the researcher sent interview questionnaires to 149 randomly selected museums by email. As a result, 21 organizations completed the questionnaires between 11 October and 25 October 2013, representing a response rate of 14%. The target population for this research was identified within museums in the UK. The sample frame included mainly education curators in their institutions, but some of them were not involved with their educational programmes, being art museum managers and collections and marketing officers. However, they have lots of experience so they were able to give their own professional perspectives.

The collected data for curators has been analyzed thematic approaches. Braun and Clarke (2006:11) claim that thematic analysis might be "a particularly useful method when you are investigating an under-researched area, or with participants whose views on the topic are not known". Therefore, the thematic analysis was applied to gain curators' perspectives on the older people's art activities to gather a broad overview of the research topic.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

The central aim of this research is to ascertain the factors determining the nature of activities provided for older persons at art museums. A total of 21 curators responded to this question and the data were collected through interview questionnaires. This study outlined these outcomes throughout the thematic analysis.

What Motivates Art Museums to Work with Older People?

Society Obligation

Ten of the curators were keen to illustrate that social obligations and inclusion are important elements for older people. A learning officer who worked at an art museum stated that *"It is really important to work with people of all ages as each age group can bring a new/different perspective to the work on display. We aim to be an inclusive in all the work we do and offer activities which are accessible to all"*; A collections and marketing officer who worked at an art musums stated: *"Museums are for the people, so all age groups should be included in this"*.

Expanding Audiences

Eleven of the curators describe the significance of audience development and noticed the growing market regarding their income streams. Therefore, art mseums may create visitor value and make financial resources through educational activities. A museum manager stated: *"Audience development, bringing in new audiences older age groups have more time and are particularly interested in visiting galleries"*; A community engagement officer who worked at a museum stated: *"we have a large aging population over 50 who are a key target audience and increasing visitor numbers and getting the additional spend is a key part of why we want to attract older people"*.

National and Local Government Agendas

Six of the curators recognise the specific impact of outreach programs on older people with dementia, Alzheimer's or other conditions. The following is stated in the sample: *"New initiatives and agendas may motivate this kind of work e.g. national dementia strategy, new ACE funding streams"* (An outreach officer who worked at an art museum); *"Museums Association museums change lives' agenda [...] improves the wellbeing of older people and their carers"* (A community engagement officer who worked at a art museum).

Interpreting Collections

Ten of the curators intended older people to increase their knowledge while also wishing to gain knowledge from older people through interpreting collections. The feedback from an outreach officer who worked at an art museum stated that *"Recognition that older members of the community bring a wealth of information, experience and knowledge to interpreting and interacting with collections"*; In addition, the benefit of reminiscing on older peoples' memories is illustrated in the following statements by a collections and marketing officer who worked at an art museum: *"Reminiscence, object handling for example can be very beneficial for the older generation"*.

Engagement with Local Communities

The theme emerges that the experts tapped into the motivation for community engagement. Art activities may create societal value for older people. A learning assistant who worked at a art museum stated: *"it would be fantastic to be able to work with older people for the sheer benefits of community engagement"*.

Enhancement of Quality of Life

Five of the curators believe that fun and enjoyment can be significant factors for older people to enhance in art activities. An education curator stated: *"Enhancement of quality of life and fun"*; A curator who worked a City Council stated: *"Generally exhibitions are [...] to enjoy but it is recognised that some people, perhaps older people"*. Moreover, three of the curators also reported that the art activities may enhance personal interest and develop abilities and social skills with others. A museum coordinator explained: *"Gallery is concerned [...] to enable the older generation to give [...] an opportunity to participate in learning new skills or redeveloping forgotten skills and to keep those in care interested in socialising with others [...]"*; A collections and marketing officer who worked at an art museum stated: *"Prime audience, having the time to help museums and galleries, in pursuit of their own personal interests"*.

What Practice Has Been Developed?

Twenty-one curators completed this question and they reported that various art activities were practiced by older people. The main activities are painting and drawing, crafts, gallery tours and talks, outreach programmes, volunteering programmes, music activities and oral histories, reminiscence training programme, history of art, loans service, and supporting healthcare with dementia awareness. The following is stated in the sample about activities developed by curators in their organizations: *"We offer a wide range of programmes for older people which include our 'Art-Historical Leads' events [...] with an insight into contemporary art through art history"* (A head of education who worked at an art museum). *"Free loans service, Memories Matter, loaning museum handling boxes, exhibitions and picture packs to organisations and homes working with older people"* (An outreach officer who worked at an art museum). A number of art museums have provided programmes for older people through diverse efforts. However, two of them explained the difficulties in delivering sessions because older people require specific care services such as facilities and staff. *"While*

these activity [...] a success, we have found it difficult for many reasons to provide effective practice on-site at the Museum. Factors include the historic nature of the building, which means that lift access is limited. Transport is also an issue and access from transport to the site. Also supervision (where visitors are from care homes and are perhaps in need of more physical support).....we needed a very high ratio of carers to residents, almost 1:1 [...] there was more of a risk both to the visitor and the artefacts"(A learning assistant who worked at a art museum). *"Practical considerations – mobility, toilets, access etc"*(An education development officer who at an art museum).

Why Has the Practice Developed?

Social Well-Being

Eight of the curators were conscious of social well-being and indicated the importance of partnerships between local communities and art museums in terms of arts and health. They also recognise their responsibility as a supporter for citizens. In particular, they think about illhealth and disabilities to improve older people's well-being. There is evidence to support older people through art museum activities. *"Arts and Health as a recognised area of practice/closer collaborations between the galleries and health services [...] many older people cannot access galleries [...] unless we bring the collections to them"*(An education development officer who worked at an art museum). *"Involvement in new initiatives around providing creative opportunities for older people living with dementia in the community and residential care. This is happening in partnership with other Manchester-based arts organisations, art museums"*(An outreach officer who worked at an art museum).

Social Interaction

Most curators are aware of the importance of social inclusion so they offer places to meet and be social for older generations. A Museum coordinator stated this point that *"Museums can be hired and passed [...] either in a care home environment or at the Museum, to stimulate conversation and interaction with others"*; A collections & marketing officer who worked at an art museum stated: *"Tea mornings with look around museum – offers a place to meet and be social for older generations [...] many older people become members/Friends"*.

Visitors Experiences

Three of the curators describe their perspective from their own experience regarding the impact of visitors' experiences. Regarding these impacts of education for older people, an art museum coordinator stated, *"We host a variety of artist-led workshops to encourage adults to participate/re-awaken their interest in the visual arts"*; A collections & marketing officer who worked at a art museum stated that *"Visitor Experience – huge in museums today, due to government policy"*.

Audience Development

Three of the curators explained this as older people can support themselves financially as 'key volunteers' and 'museum visits'. A touring manager who worked at an art museum stated that, *"Particular retired people who have the time to develop hobbies and interests [...] technique and innovative use of materials will always be appreciated. art museum attendance on week days is often 50% or more of mature visitors who have the leisure to look at art and craft"*; A collections & marketing officer who worked at an art museum stated: *"Key volunteers [...] They are most likely to have a personal interest in a collection and want to know [...] more important [...] less paid staff"*.

Funding Opportunity

Four of the curators felt that the activities for older people would be beneficial to gain more funds to link partnerships with government and local communities. This funding opportunity is a main reason for performing their art programmes for older people. A learning and programmes coordinator who worked at an art museum stated: *“Our activities have created links with a wide variety of organisations in the community and often we are dependent on external project funding”*; A collections and marketing officer who worked at an art museum stated: *“They are [...] more important due to funding issues, less cash”*.

What Do Curators Feel Older People Need from Such Activities?

Social Support Need

Social Interaction

An art museum manager stated: *“I think one key difference is that older people are keen to engage with the art museum as a place of discussion and debate - they frequently leave comments and make repeat visits to exhibitions”*; A staff who worked at a art museum stated: *“To be active members of society, if we can encourage that then that is a positive thing”*.

Making a Contribution

Most older people tend to have more time than other generations and they want to share their experiences and knowledge with their communities. A keeper of social history who worked at an art museum praised older people's contribution: *“To feel their history is included in the displays through the objects, but also by including people's voices through oral history in the art museum where appropriate”*.

Cultural Activities

An art museum curator stated: *“This of course includes older people who [...] have more time for cultural activity than others [...] appear more interested, informed and engaged with history and culture”*. This study found that activities in art museums can enhance not only social relationships but also family ties, such as illustrated in the statement that *“Family activities need a place where older people can enjoy watching their family having fun”* (A head of education who worked at a museum).

Psychological Support Needs

Fun and Enjoyment

Arts activities can enhance good means of engaging people when they intend to learn ‘as art can be seen as enjoyable’. An art museum curator stated that *“Curators believe [...] public and local communities need something specifically for them to enjoy, learn from and be inspired”*.

Self-Esteem

A museum coordinator described the meaning of esteem for older people: *“Self-esteem, a feeling that they are not alienated from society just because of their age”*. The older people can improve their memories so that they become confident, this self-esteem was described by a learning officer who worked at an art museum: *“reminiscence activities, encouraging participants to recall memories and provide discussion points, particularly for those people who might not*

otherwise interact in this way”.

Continuity and Adjusting New Skills/Information

A museum coordinator described this point: “support and guidance in learning new skills or redeveloping old ones that have been forgotten”; A community partnership coordinator who worked at a museum stated: “To be engaged, inspired, stimulate, encounter new knowledge/learning and also share their own life experiences”.

Physical Support Needs

Safety and security

Participants reflected on personal security, safety against accidents and health and wellbeing. They explained that many older people require practical considerations such as mobility, toilets and access. A head of education who worked at a museum stated older people are, “seeking activities that they would find it hard to access elsewhere”. Furthermore, curators emphasise the importance of supporting older people who have illnesses such as dementia and Alzheimer’s: “More intense support and activities that fit a programme of activities they already do”(A community engagement manager who worked at a museum); “I am [...] improving access and information for those with visual impairments [...] great relevance to older audiences”(A touring manager who worked at a museum).

Meeting Places

Hooper-Greenhill (1991:14) indicated that libraries and museums are “the only places [people] could meet harmoniously in public”. This was confirmed by a collection and marketing officer at an art museum : “Meeting place – social aspect – variety”; A head of education who worked at a museum stated: “Family activities need a place where older people can enjoy watching their family having fun”.

Key Findings

The research findings noted that curators considered strengthening public life when they designed the activities for older people. This includes social obligations and expanding audience and national and local government agendas, interpreting collections, engagement with local communities and enhancement of quality of life.

Arts activities are developed through painting and drawing, crafts, gallery tours and talks, outreach programmes, volunteering programme, music activities and oral histories, reminiscence training programme, history of art, loans service. The reasons curators provided these was for social well-being for older people, their social interaction, visitors experiences, audience development and also in order to connect with potential funding opportunities. The majority of curators emphasise that it is beneficial to build a partnership between local communities and galleries.

Curators reflected on older people’s support needs as social, psychological and physical support needs. In terms of social support needs, this study found that activities in art galleries can enhance not only social relationships but also family ties. Psychological support was a main element for older people because they gain self-esteem through fun and mental stimulation during the learning activities. Finally, most curators reported that improving facilities and mobility was necessary for the older to easily access the activities in art galleries. These were personal security against accidents and health and well-being.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

To What Extent Do Curators Understand the Needs of Older People as Interpreted Through the Activities?

The results of this research show that most curators are required to extend social relationships through participative interaction which addresses the needs of older people for social interaction and stimulation. A curator stated that such activities make older people the subject of interactive activities and around 47% of older respondents reported significant social benefits. Maslow supports this, emphasising “a sense of belonging” which means connecting with people such as friends and neighbours (Maslow 1968 cited in Vanderhorst and McLaren 2005:518). However, it should be noted that some previous studies (Lemon et al. 1972) suggest there is no significant relationship between life satisfaction and social activity with neighbours and relatives except friends.

The results also indicate that psychological support is needed for older people. Curators reported that their programmes enable older people to gain self-esteem, enjoyment, continuity and the challenge of new skills and information as key factors in engaging with art activities in art galleries. A community engagement officer reported: “older people enjoy their visit, connecting with them at a human level – such as by using emotion instead of facts.” These results correlate with Kinney and Rentz (2005), who report that engagement in “arts-based activities show improvements in social and psychological wellbeing”.

Finally, curators also exhibited understanding of the older person need physical support at safe and secure meeting places, which their programmes reflect. Curators feel that older people seek such places to enjoy with families and friends. A collection and marketing officer who worked at an art museum stated that older people prefer a place that “offers a place to meet and be social for older generations”. Grodach (2009:489) supports this point, stating, “art spaces serve as social gathering place both within and between different groups of people”. Therefore, a curator echoed this, stating that there was a need for, “More intense support and activities” and curators replied similarly.

How Might Policy or Funding Structures Need to Change in order to Facilitate New Approaches to Working with Older People?

Most curators were conscious of the ageing population and the need for policy responses: “*Helping older people in society – government policy, changing views on museums [is now an issue for] the general public*”(A collection and marketing officer at an art museum). Some curators emphasised partnerships with local communities and government for effective services and educational activities for older people. This echoes Sandell and Nightingale (2012:24): believing museums are beneficial to collaborative work or partnerships with external stakeholders with rich resources. Several curators argued that arts and health is a recognised area of practice encouraging closer collaboration between museums and health services. Such new ways of working can be beneficial for both authorities and older people. Recent studies claim that due to changes and cuts to local funding, art museum education needs to develop relationships between health and the voluntary sector, accessing and working with hard-to-reach groups of older people in particular (Goulding 2013:29). Hence partnerships would be helpful in working with and for older people.

Curators claimed that funding is the most motivating factor when designing art programs for older people. Some curators only focus on dementia/Alzheimer's strategies because of funding opportunities. Therefore, older people who do not have serious illnesses might find it difficult to access public funding streams. Oxford Institute of Ageing Report (2010:44) indicated that, “The Arts Council goes onto call for the integration of the arts into mainstream health strategy and policy making”. Therefore each department of government such as Culture, Health, Education and Social Welfare is

required to integrate their policy strategies to support all older people equally. Even though the government has reasonable funding structures, authorities should rethink funding streams effective for older people.

One of the notable findings is that multiple measurements of art programs for older people are necessary. Even though each art museum has high quality art activities, they need to evaluate and review their programs. A community engagement officer who worked at an art museum explained: “we can monitor if it improves wellbeing of older people and their carers through evaluation models”. The staff wanted to evaluate their programs for effective support for older people. These findings are consistent with Hooper-Greenhill (1995) who suggests that, “Evaluation will become necessary throughout the development process”. Therefore, curators are required to heed older people’s opinions frequently and adjust their demands.

CONCLUSIONS

Although this study did not isolate detailed strategies for older people’s art activities it did confirm that arts activities must develop in several ways to ensure quality and addressing older people’s needs. This is because many curators recognise the increase in the ageing population and older people’s demands relating to cultural activities. Therefore, in terms of specific recommendations, art museums must: Develop effective evaluation systems for art education programs; Build systematically develop and deepen partnerships between art museums and local communities; Provide safe spaces to support older people activities. Another benefit of further research is integral policy in terms of ageing and well-being. The research indicated that partnerships would be helpful for both older people and museums. The Department for Work and Pensions (2005:72) findings showed, “partnerships are becoming more effective. But there are still too many overlaps and interfaces, especially between health and social services”. Finally, regular evaluation may lead to effective educational activities so that older people are satisfied. Even if programmes are excellent and systematic, critical evaluation is essential to gather older people’s opinions. Jones addressed this when stating that there is a, “critical need among the elderly for a student-centered approach and individual instruction”(Jones 1982 cited in Durr et al. 1992:150). Therefore, identifying how to evaluate art activities for older people is necessary for further research, which is where studies in this area should develop next.

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